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SOURCE TEXTS

Greek text drawn from public-domain editions, including:

• Patrologia Graeca, Volume 53 (J.-P. Migne), containing the Greek homilies of St. John Chrysostom
• Parallel reference to the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers (First Series), English translations for comparison
• Cross-checking against standard biblical Greek and Septuagintal usage where cited by Chrysostom

HOMILY 1
On the Beginning of the Holy Forty Days (Lent)

I rejoice and am glad to see today the Church of God adorned by the multitude of her own children, and to see all of you gathered together with such great joy. For whenever I look upon your radiant faces, I take it as the clearest proof of the gladness within your souls—just as a wise man once said: “When the heart rejoices, the face blossoms.”

For this reason, I myself rose today with even greater eagerness, wishing to share in this spiritual joy with you and to announce to you the arrival of the holy Forty Days—the medicine, I say, of our souls.

Let us not serve blindly, but with reason, examining our own conduct. For what profit is there to us from daily gluttony and excessive drunkenness? And why do I even say “profit”? Rather, great loss and unbearable harm result from it. For when the mind is drowned by excessive drinking, straightway from the very beginning the benefit of fasting is driven away.

Tell me, what is more unpleasant—what more shameful—than those who drink unmixed wine until midnight, and then at dawn, when the sun rises, exhale the stench of wine as though freshly drenched in it? They are offensive to those who meet them, despised by their own servants, mocked by all who have even a slight sense of what is fitting—and before all this, they draw upon themselves God’s indignation because of such excess, disorder, and useless intemperance.

“Drunkards,” he says, “will not inherit the Kingdom of God.” What, then, could be more miserable than to be cast out from the very threshold of the Kingdom for the sake of a brief and destructive pleasure?

May none of those gathered here be caught in this passion. Rather, with all self-control and discipline, having partaken even of today's meal wisely, and having been freed from the storm and turbulence produced by drunkenness, may we reach the harbor of our souls—that is, fasting—so that we may richly reap its benefits.

For just as gluttony has become the cause of countless evils for the human race, so fasting and restraint of the stomach have always been the source of unspeakable goods for us. From the beginning, God knew that this remedy was especially needed for the soul's salvation, and so He immediately gave this command to the first-formed man:

"From every tree of the garden you may eat; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat."

To say "eat this, but not that" was already a type of fasting. But he did not keep the command. Overcome by lack of self-control, he committed disobedience and was condemned to death.

Seeing the first man living in Paradise—a life free from toil—and though bound to a body, living like an angel upon the earth, the evil demon, enemy of our nature, sought to trip him and cast him down through greater promises. So great is the danger of not remaining within proper limits, but reaching greedily for more. And thus a wise man said: "Through the envy of the devil, death entered the world."

Do you see how from the beginning death gained entrance through gluttony? Look again at Scripture continually condemning indulgence: "The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play." And elsewhere: "He ate and drank and grew fat, and kicked." The inhabitants of Sodom, too, brought upon themselves inevitable wrath through this very excess.

But now look at the triumphs of fasting. Moses, having fasted forty days, received the tablets of the Law. Yet seeing the people drunk and lawless, he shattered them—judging it unfitting for such a people to receive laws from the Master. He fasted another forty days and again received the tablets.

Elijah fasted the same number of days, escaped the tyranny of death, and was taken up in a fiery chariot—and even now has not tasted death. Daniel, through fasting, obtained that marvelous vision and tamed the fury of lions, transforming them into the gentleness of sheep—not changing their nature, but mastering their savagery through discipline.

By fasting, the Ninevites revoked the sentence of destruction, even compelling beasts as well as humans to participate, and thus turned from evil deeds and called forth God's mercy.

And why speak only of servants? Let us come to our common Lord. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself fasted forty days and thus entered combat with the devil, giving us an example, so that through fasting we might arm ourselves and draw strength for battle.

But perhaps someone will ask: Why did the Master fast the same number of days as the servants? Not without purpose, nor by chance—but wisely, and in accordance with His ineffable love. So that He would not be thought to have appeared only in appearance, nor to have lacked true flesh, nor to be outside human nature, He fasted the same number of days—silencing the shameless objections of contentious men. Thus He teaches us by deeds that He bore the same flesh as we do, and was not foreign to our nature.

Therefore, since the power of fasting and its great benefit to the soul have been made clear—both from the servants and from the Lord—let us not reject the benefit that comes from fasting through laziness, nor resent its arrival, but rejoice and exult, according to blessed Paul: “Though our outer person is wasting away, the inner person is being renewed.”

For fasting is food for the soul. And just as bodily food fattens the body, so fasting strengthens the soul, gives it light wings, lifts it upward, makes it accustomed to contemplating the things above, and sets it higher than the pleasures and delights of this present life.

And just as light ships cross the seas more swiftly, while those weighed down with heavy cargo become waterlogged and sink, so fasting makes the mind lighter, enabling it to cross with ease the sea of this present life, and to rise toward heaven and the things of heaven—considering the things of this life as nothing, passing them by as no more than shadows and dreams.

But drunkenness and gluttony weigh down the mind. They fatten the flesh and make the soul a captive, besieging it from every side, not allowing the faculty of judgment to stand firm, but preparing it to be swept headlong over cliffs, working in every way against its own salvation.

Therefore, beloved, let us not manage our salvation carelessly. Knowing what evils are born from indulgence, let us flee the harm it brings.

For not only in the New Covenant—where the demand for true discipline is greater, the contests are more intense, the labors heavier, the prizes many, and the crowns beyond words—not only there is luxury forbidden, but even in the Old Covenant, when they still sat in shadow and clung to the lamp, being led little by little like children nourished with milk—even then they were not permitted to live in indulgence.

And lest you think we speak against luxury without proof, listen to the prophet:

“Woe to those who sleep on beds of ivory and stretch themselves upon their couches; who eat lambs from the flock and calves from the midst of the stall; who drink strained wine and anoint themselves with the finest oils—as though they considered this life to be standing and remaining, and not as something that is passing away.”

Do you see how strong the prophet’s accusation is? Their enjoyment reaches only the throat and the lips and goes no further. Pleasure is brief and temporary—but pain is continual, with no end.

All human and fleshly things are like this: luxury, human glory, power, wealth, prosperity—nothing secure, nothing stable, nothing fixed. They pass like rushing river-currents, leaving those who chase them naked and desolate.

But spiritual things are not like this—rather the opposite: firm and immovable, not subject to change, stretching on into the age to come.

What madness, then, to exchange the immovable for what shakes; the eternal for what is temporary; what remains forever for what flies away; what prepares enjoyment in the age to come for what prepares punishment there.

Therefore, beloved—considering all these things, and taking great care for our salvation—let us despise indulgence as useless and harmful. Let us embrace fasting and the whole discipline that follows it. Let us show a great change in our way of life, and each day let us hurry toward the practice of good works.

So that, spending the whole season of the holy Forty Days in spiritual commerce, and gathering great wealth of virtue, we may be counted worthy to reach the Day of the Lord, to approach that awesome spiritual table with confidence, and with a pure conscience to share in those ineffable and immortal goods—being filled with grace through the prayers and intercessions of those who have pleased Christ our loving God, to whom, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, be glory, dominion, and honor, now and always, and unto the ages of ages. Amen.